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ABSTRACT

Formative, in-process evaluation results can be used to refine or "fine tune" Even Start programs. The assumption is that the programs have obtained comprehensive and appropriate empirical data on the assessment of the program as a whole as well as its specific goals. This six-step model uses evaluation data to improve program delivery. The steps are as follows: (1) convene a planning team of five to eight people who represent various aspects of Even Start delivery; (2) develop a shared understanding about what the local evaluation results mean for or about the program; (3) explore reasons for the results (the problems); (4) generate and evaluate possible solutions; (5) develop and implement the plan for program refinement; and (6) evaluate the success of the plan. Following the presentation and explanation of this model, two fictional examples of the model in action are provided. One describes a program that uses that model to solve the program's retention problems. The second focuses on a program that encounters unexpected problems with Even Start parents' reading ability. (YLB)

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# To Refine Family Literacy Programs

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Kent State University

June, 1994

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**Using Evaluation Results**
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When the "E" word-- evaluation-- is mentioned, reactions from most Even Start professionals range from weary sighs and rolling eyes to vocal groans and visible frowns. Evaluation activities are viewed as extra work, in many cases work that prevents delivery of the instructional program itself. After all, testing isn't teaching.

Evaluation will always be part of projects like Even Start, however. The projects are operated with public funds, and the public has the right to know about the effect of those funds on participating families. Other family literacy practitioners are also interested in ES evaluation data. These professionals may wish to know "what works" under what circumstances, so that they may learn from others' experiences and avoid others' difficulties. In fact, Even Start's designation as a demonstration project requires this sort of sharing. National evaluation projects are designed to provide both of these types of information about ES projects throughout the

nation.

But the "broad strokes" picture painted by national evaluation data may not be very helpful to individual programs. This is why local evaluations are also critical. The purpose of local evaluations is to determine the extent to which individual programs are meeting their goals, both (a) the "external" objectives developed for program applications, which respond to ES legislation, and (b) the "internal" objectives that reflect more closely what the program really hopes to accomplish. If local evaluations are developed and conducted carefully, they can provide formative results, or in-process guidance for improving all aspects of an Even Start program, as well as summative results or final evaluations of program effectiveness.

Our focus in this paper is on the use of formative, in-process evaluation results to refine or "fine tune" programs. We assume that the programs have obtained comprehensive and appropriate empirical data on the assessment of the program as a whole as well as its specific goals. First, we present and explain a six-step model for using evaluation data to improve program delivery. Then we provide two examples of the model in action. Although the examples we present relate directly to ES, the model itself is useful for <u>any</u> type of program.

## The Model

### Step 1: Convene a Planning Team

ES programs wishing to use local evaluation results to refine their programs can do so. We recommend that you convene a small planning team (5-8 people), whose members represent various aspects of ES delivery, to assist you. This group should include parent representation and may include members who are not routinely involved in ES. For example, a public school curriculum specialist or a college or university educator might be a helpful addition to the planning team, depending on the nature of the problems the group is exploring. Together, members of this planning team should follow the steps outlined below to ensure a systematic and thorough consideration of both the local evaluation results and the direction they provide for improving program delivery.

### Step 2: Understand the Results

The second step involves developing a shared understanding about what the local evaluation results mean for or about your ES program. In other words, the planning group will need to decide if the results "make sense." This ordinarily involves thinking about and evaluating the measures used to obtain the results -- Do they make sense or "ring true" from the perspective of program participants?

One way to appraise results of a local evaluation is to assess the validity (sometimes called "truthfulness") of the measures used to generate those results. To do this, the planning group should read the evaluation report carefully, find the measures used to evaluate the goals and that led to the identification of the problem, and evaluate the practical worth of those measures. To do so, the group should ask, Are these good and reasonable measures of the level of achievement for this goal? For example, "successful retention" might be defined as participation for one month or one year. Likewise, adults' writing ability might be assessed using standardized usage tests or evaluation of pieces of their writing that were completed as part of ES activities. Better correlation between the definition and the measures selected for use in the evaluation results in greater validity or truthfulness of the results.

This assessment of validity or truthfulness can yield three possible outcomes. If the planning group decides that the measures are valid, then they should proceed to step three of the model, because they have decided that the problem(s) identified in the evaluation report is real. If the planning group decides that the measures are invalid, then the ES coordinator and local evaluator(s) should meet to refine the evaluation plan so that subsequent assessments can yield more useful infor-

mation. And finally, if the planning group has questions about the validity of the measures, they can seek additional information, perhaps by asking the local evaluators to provide other perspectives about the aspect of the program under question. For example, the planning group might request that another type of measure be added to subsequent evaluations of the issue under question, or they might ask local evaluators if already-collected data could provide another view of the issue under study.

Step 3: Explore Reasons for the Results

If completing the second step in the model convinces the planning group that there is indeed a problem with some aspect of ES delivery, the next step is to try to identify reasons for the problem's existence. Most problems associated with complex delivery systems like ES are themselves complex, so this will likely be no easy task. Nevertheless, it's important to try to identify reasons because they can provide focus for developing solutions.

We recommend that the search for reasons be as objective as possible. Try to avoid simplistic, "blame the victim" reasons. For example, if retention of ES families is identified as a problem, it might be tempting to conclude that parents "just don't care enough" to attend regularly. Even if this is true, however, it is likely

that particular aspects of the program contribute to this attitude-- program location or times may be inconvenient, for example, or adults may not view ES activities as interesting or helpful. A "blame the victim" reason cannot yield program refinements. Rather, the planning team should attempt to generate possible reasons that can result in program improvement somehow. To do otherwise renders the entire evaluation process fruitless.

We also recommend that the search for reasons be conducted broadly (i.e., by considering opinions of the planning group, those of other ES staff and participants, and, if warranted, those of outside experts). Brief person-to-person interviews or conversations may be an efficient way to gather this information. In the case of problems with retention, for example, each member of the planning group might agree to talk with three other persons about why retention might be a problem in the ES program. When the planning group reconvenes, a group list of possible reasons can be developed, and items on the list can be evaluated as "likely" or "not likely."

Depending upon the nature of the problem, it may also be necessary to observe instruction, analyze instructional materials, or interview learners. Teachers may initially feel a bit insecure about classroom observations, but anxiety will be lessened if teachers are represented on the planning team and involved in the solution of

identified problems. After all, everyone involved in ES shares the desire to develop a program that is as successful as possible in meeting its goals.

Step 4: Generate and Evaluate Possible Solutions

The time and energy devoted to the two preceding steps in the model can help you focus on likely causes for problems. Such a focus is necessary, of course, before solutions can be generated. The fourth stage in the model is to do just that-- generate possible solutions and then select the one most likely to solve the problem.

Brainstorming is probably the most effective way to accomplish this step. We recommend that the brainstorming be conducted in two phases. During the first, the goal is for the planning group to list as many solutions to the problem as possible. Consequently, initial directions should remind them not to evaluate or elaborate upon particular suggestions. Rather, generating lots of ideas is the goal. As ideas are suggested, record them on chart paper or a chalkboard.

This initial brainstorming will probably take no more than 10 or 15 minutes. Be patient after the first lull in conversation, however; it's been our experience that brainstorming suggestions often come in "waves." What's on the tips of our tongues is offered first. After these

ideas are shared, we need a bit of time to think about others, and often these "second wave" ideas are more complex and thoughtful.

After possible solutions have been generated, the group should evaluate them. The goal of this second phase is to select the one solution that the group believes is most likely to solve the problem. In order to accomplish this, the group will need to think about qualities of effective solutions. Such qualities as feasibility given program resources and constraints and allowable activities given federal regulations will probably need to be considered. It might be helpful to list the qualities that the group generates for continued reference.

Next, individual members of the brainstorming group assess the possible solutions. The easiest way to accomplish this is probably to create a "short list" for further consideration: a) ask each member of the group to select no more than three likely solutions in rank order; b) poll the group, recording the number of first place votes, second place votes, and third place votes for each possible solution; and c) examine the results to see if the group agrees on the two or three most likely solutions.

Solutions on the "short list" should be discussed thoroughly so that one can be selected for implementation. Discussions can be left unstructured or can focus

on creating lists of advantages and disadvantages of particular choices. This discussion may reveal refinements that can strengthen particular solutions. The group should strive for achieving unanimous support for one solution.

Step 5: Develop and Implement the Plan for Program Refinement

Having proceeded this far, you know where you want the ES program to go, and you have group consensus about this direction. The next stage of the model is designed to help you figure out how to get there. To do this, you will need to develop a strategic plan, based on your chosen solution, that lists: a) all activities that need to be accomplished in the order in which they must occur, b) the resources (e.g., financial, human) needed to accomplish each activity, c) a timeline for accomplishing each activity, and d) the person or people responsible for oversight or the actual conduct of each activity.

Brainstorming can also be effective for creating a comprehensive list of activities, which will then need to be organized in some way. Depending upon the nature of the solution, activities may need to be organized chronologically, in logical progression, or, if resources are limited, in priority order. A good list of activities will provide a step-by-step blueprint for moving the

program from where it is to where it wants to be. Toward that end, several people should probably review the proposed activity list for completeness. After the activity list is developed, decisions can be made about other aspects of the plan, such as resources, timelines, and people responsible.

A chart for summarizing decisions related to the strategic plan is appended to this paper. We recommend that the final version of the plan be cast into chart form and shared with all those interested in or affected by it. Moreover, we recommend that the ES coordinator periodically seek input from the persons responsible for particular activities to ascertain that progress is being made in a timely manner.

Step 6: Evaluate the Success of the Plan

If local evaluators have been involved in previous steps of the process, then they can probably assist in the development of a scheme to determine the impact of the program refinement. If local evaluators have not been previously involved, now is the time to contact them. Share with them the plan for program refinement and the particular aspects of your ES program that you hope the refinement will affect. Ask them to be particularly careful with the next local evaluation of those particular aspects. Ask them to include a separate section about the success of the refinements in their

next evaluation report.

## Examples of the Model in Action

Below we provide fictional accounts of how two ES programs used this model to refine their programs based on the results of their local evaluations. We hope that these concrete examples will help you see how the model can be employed in your own program.

### The Problem: Retention

It didn't take Jane Smith, ES coordinator, long to understand the most significant finding in her program's local evaluation: They had retention problems. She knew this was the case, and program records documented it. Moreover, she knew that several staff members were concerned about retention. Armed with evaluation results pointing to this problem and knowing she had some staff support for attempting to solve it, Jane decided to convene a group to explore the problem more thoroughly and to generate some solutions. She invited the adult education teacher, the parenting education teacher, two ES parents, and the local adult education director to participate with her.

The planning group first attempted to judge the severity of their retention problem by referring to printed accounts of retention in other adult education programs and by exploring community factors that might influence

retention in their ES program. They learned that retention is a common problem in adult education programs, but that family literacy programs generally have higher retention rates than other types of adult education programs. They also learned that several neighborhood schools in their community also had retention problems; some had up to 75% student turnover each year.

Seeking information from published literature and from their local community helped the planning group put the ES retention problem in perspective. However, the group decided to explore the issue further by interviewing several parents who had either persisted in the program or dropped out of ES but stayed in the community. Their questions to parents were simple: Why did you choose to leave the program? and How could the ES program better meet your needs?

Although parents offered many suggestions for program improvement, one common complaint seemed directly related to the retention problem: ES dropouts did not see the value of ES instruction, especially the adult education component. Persisters, too, seemed unsure about the adult education component. Although they stayed with ES, they said it was to benefit their children. The adult educator, who was part of the planning group, indicated that his curriculum was conventional, workbook-driven and skills-oriented. He also indicated that he wished to

alter his curriculum but didn't know how to begin.

After discussing and listing a variety of possible solutions, from providing tangible incentives to providing periodic followup to students, the solution to this problem seemed obvious, although the group recognized that time, energy, and support would be necessary to solve it. For the short term, the planning group recommended that the adult educator talk with learners about the value of their instructional sessions and involve them, whenever possible, in establishing academic goals. Furthermore, the planning group recommended staff development designed to help all ES staff develop and implement learner-centered curriculum as a long-term solution to the retention problem. Specifically, their advice was to focus on the interrelationship of program components so that the entire ES effort could better meet learners' needs and interests.

Jane was a bit surprised that the best solution to fostering retention appeared to be in the classroom. But she trusted that the planning group had considered the issue carefully, and she looked forward to the next local evaluation so that the group could see the results of their efforts.

The Problem: Adults' Reading Ability

Unlike Jane, Bob Brown, another ES coordinator, was

shocked when he read an evaluation report for his program that indicated problems with ES parents' reading ability. He hadn't predicted problems in this area; the two ES adult educators were also surprised when Bob shared evaluation results with them. The three decided to pursue the issue by creating a planning group that also included a parent representative and the county reading supervisor.

When the planning group read the evaluation report carefully, they discovered a potential explanation for the discouraging results. The reading evaluation was based on results of a standardized comprehension test, which consisted of having adults read short paragraphs and answer multiple choice questions about them in a timed situation. The county reading supervisor helped the group see the limited definition of reading that provided the basis for the test. Moreover, the adult educators recalled that several parents seemed very anxious on the day they had administered the test. As a result of this discussion, the planning group decided that they questioned the validity of the standardized test as an accurate and comprehensive measure of a person's reading ability. For this reason, they determined that it was unnecessary to pursue possible program refinements based on these questionable evaluation results. Instead, they recommended that Bob and the reading super-

visor work with the local evaluators to refine the ways in which reading ability would be assessed in the ES program.

## Conclusion

No matter how effective a particular family literacy program, refinements are always possible. Systematic and comprehensive local evaluation should provide direction for these program refinements. The five-step model that we describe in this paper can help ES professionals evaluate potential problems that are identified in local evaluation reports, understand their causes, and develop effective plans for solving them.

We know this model can work. We have used it in many situations to help educators solve program-related problems and to refine program delivery. As family literacy professionals, we share the hope that our programs will assist families in improving the quality of their lives. Periodic and systematic attention to program refinement can increase the likelihood that all of our goals will be met.

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR _____

| ACTIVITIES | RESOURCES NEEDED | TIMELINE | PERSON RESPONSIBLE |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |